

Lotus Feet

I.

in the hong kong history museum,
there is a wall.

there is a wall:
coated in black & white photos
of cloth-wrapped feet
in tiny, arched shoes.

their feet:
bones broken
every other evening, feet
folded in at the toes
& heaved under the heel,
feet, as bound as the women
who owned them.

under the calm
of a saturday afternoon,
my own feet begin to ache.

II.

every afternoon, i would find *nai nai*¹
perched on a wooden stool,
soaking her folded feet in hot water.

& i would sit on the floor to listen:
her stories about monkey kings,
golden thrones, goddesses. i would listen to her
speak of her mother, watch her face twist
from sadness as she spoke of her brother.

one day, *nai nai* told me about foot-binding.

foot-binding: a chinese custom
that lived in place of women.

foot binding: a chinese custom
of bent, broken girls forced
into wooden shoes
for the rest of their lives.

for men. their fascination: perfect,
pointed feet. paralyzed wives.

as she spoke, *nai nai* gently wiped away
the tears i didn't know i was crying
& told me that i was so lucky
because the pain.

the pain still keeps her
up at night.

lotus feet. that day, i learned that bound feet
were called lotus feet.

III.

oh, *yao niang*², *yao niang*
didn't it hurt when you danced?
yao niang, yao niang,
was the pain worth his love?

IV.

i still cry whenever i think
about the pain,
the women,
the girls,
the lives they led,
the husbands,
the pain.

V.

my feet are raw
& stinging,
scarred bugbites
on my right foot,
tan lines—

but my toes.

my toes are long, unfurling
as i stand in the museum,
stealing back the space
nai nai never had,
the space great-grandmother
never had, space
all the lotus feet
young girls, women
& elderly women—
space they never had.

VI.

in dreams, i slide strips of cloth
between my teeth.

i grind away
& spit them out
at the feet of my emperor.

¹*Nai Nai*: Grandmother in Mandarin.